

## **The Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Charleston**

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It was a warm day, and as Abraham Lincoln stepped onto the podium at 2:45, immense applause broke out. When Lincoln began his speech, his booming voice silenced the large crowd. The day was September 18, 1858, and more than 12,000 people had come to the Coles County fairgrounds in Charleston, Illinois, to hear the debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas as they vied for a seat in the U.S. Senate. Lincoln knew this area well because his father and his stepmother had settled here. This was the fourth of seven debates held in Illinois. While Douglas was famous across the nation, Lincoln was barely known. These seven debates had a profound effect because they helped Lincoln become President of the United States and ultimately ended slavery in the nation.

Slavery was extremely controversial during the early nineteenth century. After America had won a vast amount of land during the Mexican War of 1848, disputes arose over whether a territory should be slave or free. In 1854, Douglas championed popular sovereignty in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, thereby allowing settlers of a newly-formed state to determine if slavery would exist. This resulted in more dispute and the formation of the Republican Party.

In general, Democrats considered slaves property and wanted slavery to remain legal. Douglas, a Democrat, claimed that he did not care whether slavery existed or not. Republicans, on the other hand, believed that slavery violated basic human rights and insisted that everyone has “the right to put into his mouth the bread that his own hands have earned.”

In 1858, Lincoln challenged Douglas to seven debates. Douglas initially declined because he feared the debates would give Lincoln too much attention, but he finally accepted after newspapers called him a coward. Douglas chose the sites of the seven debates and limited each debate to three hours. On September 17, 1858, the candidates arrived in Mattoon by train and traveled to Charleston the next morning.

Flags, banners, and bunting decorated the streets of Charleston. Thirty-two couples on horseback accompanied Douglas as he marched towards Charleston, while Lincoln's entourage featured a float with thirty-two ladies, representing the thirty-two states of the Union. Large crowds stretching over a mile followed their favorite candidate.

The debaters targeted two audiences: those who cared about the speakers' showmanship and charisma, and those who cared more about future plans for the nation. Lincoln began his speech by clarifying his position on slavery, stating that he did not believe in total equality. Later on, Lincoln attacked Douglas' idea of popular sovereignty, emphasizing that Douglas denied Kansas the opportunity to put popular sovereignty to use in 1856. Lincoln further accused Douglas of inconsistency by not promoting the Lecompton Constitution that would have allowed Kansas to set up a constitutional convention and a vote on slavery. Lincoln finished his hour claiming that Douglas' many changes to the Toombs Bill prevented a popular election in Kansas.

Douglas spent most of his speech denying Lincoln's accusations and then attacking him, stating that Lincoln was trying to unite the Whigs and the Republicans and that Lincoln had failed to support the United States during the Mexican War. Douglas also challenged Lincoln's notion of African American's equality, which Lincoln then

defended in his thirty-minute rejoinder. Lincoln also argued that Douglas' claims lacked evidence, which resulted in laughter and applause from the audience. However, Douglas' accusation that Lincoln did not vote to send supplies to American soldiers during the Mexican War made Lincoln lose his temper. In a show of physical strength, he hauled Orlando B. Ficklin, a Democratic congressman, to the podium and asked Ficklin to confirm that Lincoln had voted for necessary military supplies. Amidst loud cheers, Ficklin testified that Lincoln did indeed do so, proving Douglas' accusations false. Lincoln then concluded his speech, and the audience cheered for both candidates.

Overall, Douglas spent more time, money, and energy trying to win the election. He traveled over 5,000 miles and spent an estimated \$50,000 campaigning, while Lincoln only spent \$1,000. On November 2, 1858, people voted. Even though the Republicans received more votes (125,430 to 121,609), the legislature favored Douglas 54 to 46. In Coles County, Lincoln edged Douglas by less than five percent.

Despite his loss, Lincoln soon became nationally famous. Conversely, Southern Democrats never forgave Douglas for saying that slavery could be banned by a territorial government. In 1860, Lincoln won the presidential election by gaining the votes of 1,865,000 Americans, while only 1,375,000 favored Douglas.

In conclusion, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates changed how politicians campaign. Today presidential debates occur frequently during the course of an election campaign, and their format closely resembles the one established by Lincoln and Douglas 150 years ago. The 1858 debates ultimately gained Abraham Lincoln the recognition he needed to become president, and that helped end slavery. [From Frank L. Dennis, *The Lincoln-*

*Douglas Debates*; Richard Allen Heckman, *Lincoln vs. Douglas*; Brendan January, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* and Saul Sigelschiffer, *The American Conscience*.]